



### Simon interviewing Mireille Airault, who used to be maire of Quintin

**Simon:** So I'm here with Mireille who tells me that she was once the maire of Quintin.

**Mireille:** Uhha

**Simon:** And I thought it would be very interesting to hear more about what the role of a maire is and what what what a maire does. Because it's quite a different system in France than it is in Britain. Correct me if I'm wrong, but every community has a maire.

**Mireille:** True, even the smallest village.

**Simon:** Right. And, um, so tell me how that happens. And how where did that where does that come from? Where is the origin of that?

**Mireille:** Well, globally, not long, still not long ago, we had thirty six thousands maire in France. Thanks to a few mergers between er villages and towns there's only thirty two thousand left today, which is still a lot. But yes it's true. Every. It's um part of the history, it it comes from the Middle Age. At that time all the counties had a castle and er the Baron or who whatever title it was, was kind of administrating his own county. And at some point it has to be a bit more structured so the noble and the Baron was no longer fashionable at that time and it became even less fashionable at the Revolution. I'm not a historian so I'm not going to be very um precise, but this is er the very beginning and I get it in all countries someone has to administrate whether it is the county, the region, the country, the town, the village, so er the solution we found in er France was to have a a maire. And then a city council or er or a village council and it's still working that way. But it has to be optimised and um this is the way it's moving forward now in order to um work as other European countries where the er number of maires are much much lower.

**Simon:** So what are the main functions of a maire now? And

**Mireille:** Um, um, it's more or less dealing with absolutely everything, which is a terrible workload and time.

**Simon:** OK

**Mireille:** Er, I have another job which is um Consultant and I'm um helping managers and directors to develop their er management skills and one point there is to help them to delegate, to er their subordinates who are the managers and the work, if we can call that the work, the function of maire is exactly the contrary. Everything is ending on the maire office and er the er maire is officially responsible and accountable for absolutely everything.



**Simon:** Right

**Mireille:** So if there is something happening in your village in your city and and someone is falling over on the pavement because there's a piece which was not at its place, you you you can get you to court for that.

**Simon:** Right, Right.

**Mireille:** And eventually end up in prison and gaol. Which never happens actually.

**Simon:** OK.

**Mireille:** Unless you have been er really er stealing the the money from er someone or from the from the state. But

**Simon:** Right. And so is is the maire tied to a political party or is it an independent.

**Mireille:** It's er You don't have to. Specially in small towns like Quintin. It's not an obligation to be part of a political party. It's er more needed when you candidate for bigger mandate with regards to Brittany administration for example.

**Simon:** Yes

**Mireille:** Or with regard to country responsibilities. But for small towns like Quintin, no, it's not necessary.

**Simon:** Right

**Mireille:** To be um either on the left or on the right hand side of the politics. It's more because it's it's a small city where you know more or less everybody and they come to you and they vote for you because they trust you for being able in capacity to administrate the city. Not because you er are part of a political party.

**Simon:** Right. Ok. So how did you become maire? I mean, what made you decide to to run?

**Mireille:** So I was born in Quintin. And I left Quintin for something like twenty five years. I lived abroad at some point also. I had international responsibilities. And when I decided to um run my own business as a consultant I could do my business from any part of the world actually and I chose to come back to Brittany. And I er put my um offices in my family house in Quintin. And this is how I um I got caught. And by the time the campaign was starting in 2013 for the election to take place in 2014, um some er

people I knew in Quintin told me, we have a job for you next year. Will you come and join the party.

**Simon:** Right. So when you say you got caught, you mean this this is how you sort of fell into it.

**Mireille:** Yes.

**Simon:** Some people asked you to

**Mireille:** Yeah. To join. To join the team.

**Simon:** Right

**Mireille:** And er and at some point they asked me if I would accept to be er the maire if we win there the election.

**Simon:** Yes

**Mireille:** And before asking all the questions I said yes!

**Simon:** So you didn't even think about it.

**Mireille:** No. And I didn't even know what it was all about.

**Simon:** Right

**Mireille:** So the beginning have been quite tough for me because I had to learn everything from scratch because I didn't know anything about politics, about town administration. So I worked really hard because I hate not to be in capacity or to do something. So I worked really hard. And um it's er since you have to deal with absolutely everything you have to learn a lot of thing and you have to learn fast.

**Simon:** Right

**Mireille:** And so my days were very long and I although I didn't quit my er consultant job I had a half-time job mainly in Paris so I was working something like eight days a week. And, but I learned as fast as I could that everything could end on your office on your desk, from the dog poo on the pavement to the creation of a new district in the town the er fixing of the road er making sure that er everything were was in place. It's something I'm thinking... I'm talking and thinking at the same time, but the windows in the school

that has to be replaced because your responsibilities covered the public school, the roads, er the houses and the urbanistic roads. We have high schools. We have a hospital We have a a police station – a “gendarmérie” We have many er sport premises. What else do we have? So many things. It’s been two years since I left, and I still remember it very clearly. And er I was a a police officer by default. I was er er

**Simon:** So you become a police officer as maire that is part of the role ..

**Mireille:** Yes that goes with the role

**Simon:** Right. You can go and arrest people.

**Mireille:** Yeah. well. This is what the Prefect is telling you. You are you are a police officer, but you can’t really go in a house and say “Hands Up! You’re under arrest”.

**Simon:** OK. Do they give you a gun?

**Mireille:** No. No, no.

**Simon:** OK. Good.

**Mireille:** No gun. Good. You’re right. Because since as I have crossed eyes I wouldn’t have done a great job. So. yes. And and at the same time, every day is a new day, when you don’t know what is going to happen.

**Simon:** Yes

**Mireille:** And every day is the same day. Because it’s just like the movie “The Never Ending Day”

**Simon:** OK

**Mireille:** Every day in a year there is a set programme for the commemoration for the war, commemorations for example. There is always a speech to pronounce in front of the same old people. Every year you try to recreate a speech which is different from the previous year. Because you don’t want the people to be bored and at some point you say, well they don’t really care actually what they are. They like to be um under the flags by the monument au mort and after have a drink with the maire at the Town Hall and er it made, it made their day.

**Simon:** Yes, sure.

**Mireille:** Um. Same thing for the Bastille Day, before the firework. The maire has to pronounce a speech to welcome to welcome all the um tourists mainly and the guests

**Simon:** Yes sure

**Mireille:** That are coming here. Every year you um go to the first school day for the pupils. And it's it's yeah in the same thing. It's every day the same and every day you can be caught by surprise by something you never had before like a drown a suicide in the in the lake. er or other forms of deaths because you're called when there's a dead person in your town. And you're called also in the middle of the night where there is a lost cat.

**Simon:** OK

**Mireille:** Lost dog. And er you just have to call a service

**Simon:** Yes

**Mireille:** A veterinary service to come and catch the animal.

**Simon:** So what about the finances? I mean, do you have to deal with central government? Or do you have a fixed sort of amount of money that you as the mairie spends. Or do you have to kind of ask for money? Or, how does that all work?

**Mireille:** OK. Every beginning of the year, according to size of your town, you get a set amount of money.

**Simon:** Right

**Mireille:** Since Quintin is the centre of an urban community of twelve thousand inhabitants, you have an extra 15 or 20 percent for your budget. So you have a set budget at the beginning of the year.

**Simon:** Right

**Mireille:** It's never enough because it's public money it's terrible. And it costs a fortune to er refurbish or renovate a road, and so it's it's never enough. But you still have to do with it. Um, so you decide how you spend the money. You have the city council to interrelate and to vote the decision that has been made collectively and then you don't have the cheque to sign. It goes to the public finance which is another building next door. So this is all with the public accountant, which is independent from the maire which check if all the paperwork has been done properly, which mean if the vote has





been done properly in the city council, and then the public account pays for what you decided to spend this money.

**Simon:** Yes. And are there times that you can remember where there's really a big dispute about a decision to refurbish a building or turn a building into offices or public housing or? Are there times when they really can't agree?

**Mireille:** Yes. Because when you get elected you're never alone. You have your team which has been elected with you, but there's always opponents. Because in 2014 there were two lists of candidates so we had five opponents in or in the team. So whatever decision we were taking they were against.

**Simon:** Right

**Mireille:** That's the rules. That's the game. So yes, we had big dispute about the school – the budget we were giving to the school. There's something specific in Brittany that you have Catholic school and public school. In Quintin we have both and in most of the Breton towns and villages you have both schools because it's part of the culture. Breton culture to have Catholic school and public school. It's got nothing to do with the concept of private school which costs a lot, it's a kind of culture. So since those schools are under contract with the government as a maire we ought to finance the public school as much as the - or the Catholic school as much as the public school. And the big dispute every year when defining the budget with the opponents is you shouldn't finance the Catholic school as much as. I say, well, there's a law for that – so there's not even, no need for dispute, but it was it was a kind of belief for them that Catholic school was private. So the people who were putting their children in the Catholic private school should have money to do it. So we didn't have to fund it.

**Simon:** That's very interesting. Thank you very much for talking to us about that. Is there anything else you can think of?

**Mireille:** It's a very learning experience when you know nothing. A tiring experience. But it's a it's a passionating experience as well. What I miss today is not all the work – it was too much with the the other work I have – what I miss are the people because there's a kind of a nice way and I was born in Quintin so the people I know them since, since I was a kid and they were happy to see me coming back as a maire.

**Simon:** When you become a maire do people suddenly change the way they behave towards you? You know. Because you're a public figure. And you're also you're not without influence in some ways so. Does that make people suddenly..



**Mireille:** Two ways. Those who knew me since I was a kid ask me if they could still say “tu” to me – you know tu and vous in French. Of course you can. And er the other kind of people, since you have the power, you are the maire they so nice to you they over doing it with you, they flattering you

**Simon:** So the Toadies or er what, sycophants.

**Mireille:** Um, um

**Simon:** OK

**Mireille:** Voilà

**Simon:** Merci. Thank you very much for coming onto radio to talk to us. And hopefully that’s been really interesting and enlightening to our listeners cos er it is quite a different system I think than we are used to in England, so anyway, thank you.